

## CHAMBER CANTATA IN THE WORK OF JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (THE STAGE OF THE FORMATION OF THE COMPOSER)

<sup>a</sup>VIRA ARTEMIEVA, <sup>b</sup>OLEG BEZBORODKO, <sup>c</sup>TYMUR IVANNIKOV, <sup>d</sup>IRYNA KOKHANYK, <sup>e</sup>VALENTINA REDYA

<sup>a-c</sup>Ukrainian National Tchaikovsky Academy of Music, 1-3/11, Architect Gorodetsky Str., 01001, Kyiv, Ukraine  
email: <sup>a</sup>varmus@ukr.net, <sup>b</sup>oleg.bezborodko@gmail.com, <sup>d</sup>premierreivannikov@gmail.com, <sup>e</sup>kin\_957@ukr.net, <sup>e</sup>redyavalentina@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The purpose of the article is to reveal the specifics of the chamber cantata genre in the context of the early period of Jean-Philippe Rameau's work. The novelty of the article is due to a comprehensive look at the formation of the chamber cantata genre in the work of J.-Ph. Rameau in the context of the formation of his own compositional style. Seven chamber cantatas by Rameau were the composer's first foray into dramatic music. Taking into account the composer's existing experience in the motet genre, the article outlines the vector of the artist's assimilation of his contemporary genre system from chamber to synthetic and the movement towards dramatic music. It has been established that Rameau follows the lines of the French school in sacred music, while the vocal parts of cantatas embody an individual composer's style. In many fast numbers of the cantata, above all in the expressive instrumental obbligatos, one can note the unparalleled skill with which Rameau combines the graceful contours of French vocal declamation (with the liveliness of the Italian instrumental tradition and the musical instruments complementing the achieved dramatic effect with the solo voice), trying to compensate lack of a visual expression parameter.

**Keywords:** Jean-Philippe Rameau's oeuvre; chamber music; chamber cantata; vocal art; genre; style; baroque; national traditions.

### 1 Introduction

In the course of the all-European revival of baroque music and in the context of historically informed performance, the opera work of Jean-Philippe Rameau is gaining particular popularity. Numerous performance and directorial versions of works of mixed genres ("Platee", "Les Indes Galantes", "Les Paladins") and tragédies en musique of the composer exist in video formats and are available to anyone interested. The opera works of Jean-Philippe Rameau, as the brightest manifestation of his creative nature, are often performed and actively studied by researchers, and the most famous opuses of the composer represent the embodiment of the national traditions of French music-theatrical and vocal art, among which: attention to the embodiment of the subtlest nuances of the text in music, rhetorical declamation, the presence of dance diversions, an emphasis on the dramatic structure of the work, which all together creates a magnificent musical and theatrical canvas.

Despite the existence of a sufficient body of literature devoted to the life and work of Rameau and the cantata genre, we note the sources important for this article. This is a monograph by C.M. Girdlestone [7], research by T. Oltean [9], and the book by D. Tunley [12], in which the genre of the French cantata of the 18th century in general and in the work of Rameau in particular is studied mainly from the standpoint of its identification and comparative characteristics with the Italian primary source. The relevance of this sphere of Rameau's oeuvre for modern researchers is also confirmed by the relatively recent attribution of the Cantata to the holidays of St. Louis, reported in M. Cyr's article "A New Rameau Cantata" [3]. In another article by an American researcher, "Towards a Chronology of Rameau's Cantatas" [4], opuses stored in the archives of French and American libraries are considered. In the study of C. McManus "The Cantatas of Jean-Philippe Rameau" [8], general conclusions regarding the form, composition, staff of performers, performance nuances of the musical text of the composer's cantatas are outlined.

Among the modern works of Ukrainian musicologists, we note the dissertation of Omelchenko-Agai Kuhi "The genre of the solo cantata of the European tradition in historical development (17th-20th centuries)" [10], which traces the evolution of the Italian solo cantata genre and the existence of this genre in other countries and stylistic periods, as well as the article by G.

Dzhulay "Metamorphoses of the image of Orpheus in the French solo cantata of the 12th-13th centuries" [5].

The practical significance of the study is that its intermediate and final conclusions, individual observations and opinions can be used in the further study of the work of Jean-Philippe Rameau.

### 2 Method

The research methodology is based on approaches developed in musicology: classification-analytical, structural-functional, comparative, stylistic, intonation-thematic, traditionally used in musical analysis. The study of Rameau's musical and theatrical works is based on the principles of the musical historical school, as well as on the use of the historical and stylistic method of comprehensive research.

### 3 Results and Discussion

#### *Jean-Philippe Rameau: personal factors of formation*

Rameau's immersion in the inner world, the intensification of his intellectual life, without which the writing of theoretical works would have been impossible, draws attention to the characteristics of his personality, whose existence is depicted as a continuous creation by man of himself, a figure depicted by contemporaries as a man-mystery, a person in himself, "a person in a case". On the other hand, the unstoppable desire and striving for professional recognition as a composer, despite the title of one of the most outstanding theorists of our time, led Rameau to the operatic Olympus in the mature and late periods of his life. The mysterious combination of introverted concentration and intense inclusion in the socio-cultural life of his time determined the presence of specific, but reasonably explained aspects of his creativity.

It is known that J.-Ph. Rameau began writing large stage works at the age of fifty, which is one of the features of the artist's creative biography. This milestone, which is evidence of the maturity of a creative personality, will be the end point of the chronological dimension of the article. Namely in the first half of the composer's life, where external conditions and "personal factors" are combined, one can find answers to the riddles of his creative life path.

Turning to the first decades of the composer's life, it is possible to note a combination of the usual favorable and individually specific conditions characteristic of artists' biographies. Among the initial relevant situations, we will mention the place and conditions of the artist's birth. Born in the family of a Dijon organist in 1683, the future composer received an elementary musical education and learned to play the harpsichord, organ, and violin under the guidance of his father and uncle, who worked as local organists for many years. So, the plot of a possible biographical scenario of the future composer was partly predicted from early childhood.

The boy's development was also influenced by the city of Dijon, in whose socio-cultural space at the time of the future composer's birth provincial status and rich cultural heritage were combined. At the Jesuit College of Dijon, J.-Ph. Rameau studied for only a few years due to unsatisfactory academic performance, because, fascinated by music, he did not study other subjects (as the researchers write, the unfinished stage of basic education later reflected in the verbosity and confusion of statements in future treatises, about which contemporaries often reproached the composer ironically). In college, the young man also had the opportunity to get acquainted with the student musical theater, participation in the productions of which was his first experience, the impetus for future achievements in the opera genre. Thus, already in childhood and youth, the composer's professional guidelines were determined, which accelerated the beginning of his career: genetics, his father's attentive attitude to

the development of Jean-Philippe's abilities, as well as the cultural and artistic environment of the educational institution.

There is almost no information left about the eighteen-year-old young man's several-month trip to Italy as an accompanist of a traveling theater, but the features of Italian vocal art were later vividly manifested in the composer's chamber cantatas, which he created. Also in Paris, the composer wrote music for fair theater performances, the specifics of which he could feel "from the inside" as a participant in Italian productions, that was probably also connected with his trip to Milan.

After returning to France, Rameau worked as an organist in the cathedrals of Avignon and Clermont-Ferrand, Lyon and Paris, often changing cities and places of work. The inability to stay in one city for a long time may have been due to the search for own vocation. In 1706, fate brought him to Paris; working as an organist, there he published a small collection of harpsichord pieces that did not attract much public attention. The next attempt to 'conquer the capital' by a young performer and composer took place thirteen years later, and the emergence of a mature theoretician on the front stage of French musical culture (as the author of the 450-page "Treatise on Harmony, reduced to its natural principles", 1722) became triumphant [2].

The characteristics of the work of the early period of the artist's activity require clarification. Known primarily for his operas, Rameau is also the author of a harpsichord suite (1706), four motets and nine chamber cantatas on antique-pastoral themes. The publication of the above-mentioned fundamental theoretical work (1722) marked the beginning of a mature period of activity, but it was still more than ten years before the peak of creative expression, which indicates the absence of a clear watershed between the early and mature stages of activity, the separation of scientific and creative components of the "universal creative personality" of Rameau. The years from the artist's arrival in Paris (1722) to the premiere of his first opera can be considered such a transitional period. The premiere of the first tragédie en musique "Hippolyte et Aricie" (1733) became a landmark event in the composer's life, dividing his path into two major stages. It can be considered the beginning of the peak phase in the artist's work – "acme", which is evidenced by the level of the composer's skill in creating a tragédie en musique, and the socio-cultural resonance of the work.

Until now, there are mysteries in the features of the early period of Rameau's work. The fact that the artist, who worked as an organist for about twenty years and had a talent for composition, left behind only four examples of spiritual music in the genre of the great French motet and several chamber cantatas is surprising. Statements about dramatic theater and ballet traditions are well-known, on the basis of which the top genre of French musical theater, the symbol of the national tradition – "tragédie en musique" – arose. In addition to the related court ballet and comedy-ballet, vocal-instrumental genres are also important – for example, cantatas and motets, which, although they were in a more distant orbit relative to the center, nevertheless formed the necessary discourse for the formation of the composer's 'handwriting' of the "French style" model. The motet genre in the works of Rameau was already discussed in the pages of Ukrainian publications [1], while less attention was paid to the cantata genre. Meanwhile, the time of a kind of 'calm', called by researchers the period "between Lully and Rameau", is interesting precisely for the development of chamber genres, which rarely come to the attention of musicologists-researchers, one of which is the French cantata.

#### ***Genre of chamber cantata in the context of the French national tradition***

As it is known, the Italian origin of the genre caused the cautious attitude towards it from the side of French – known fanatical supporters of national traditions, and determined the difficult history of its entry into the sound space of French vocal-instrumental art. Rameau is considered the author of the first samples of cantata in its French variety, a popular and sought-after genre at the beginning of the 18th century (1671–1741); he

sought to popularize Italian cantatas in France. The poet published about two dozen texts, thereby defining the predominantly antique theme of the plots of French cantatas, which was variously embodied in the poetic texts of famous dramatists of that time – A. Danche, A. U. de la Motte, L. Fuselet, P.-Sh. Rua. The establishment of the French version of cantata is associated with the name of M.A. Charpentier and his work "Orphée descendant aux Enfers" (1683), and at the beginning of the 18th century, J.B. Morin played an important role in stabilizing the genre, publishing the collection "French cantatas for one and two voices accompanied by instruments" (1706). As T. Oltean notes, "although Charpentier – the eternal rival of Lully – wrote the first cantatas already at the end of the 17th century, only at the beginning of the 18th century it was possible to talk about an authentic type of French cantata <...> In France, the success of the cantata was doubled by the audience's reaction to Lully's music, which, although still highly appreciated, was considered somewhat out of fashion" [9, p. 66].

In the first half of the 18th century, the French cantata gained recognition and successfully developed in the works of many famous composers, such as N. Bernier, A. Campra, M.-P. de Montclair, L.N. Clerambault, and J.-Ph. Rameau. Musicologist D. Tunley identified more than one hundred French composers and more than four hundred titles in the genre of baroque French cantata (grouped into six cycles), dating between 1703 and the French Revolution [12]. Such a repertoire is worthy of a separate study, during which long-forgotten masterpieces could be updated. In its classical form, the composition of a solo cantata with basso continuo accompaniment (some with obligate instruments) usually consists of three recitatives and three arias, while larger cantatas for two or three voices may contain at least four arias and at least one ensemble (more often two – initial and final). In addition to the text in French, a specific feature of the French cantata is the presence of dance parts introduced into its structure and borrowed in a stylized form from the suite (presented as entrée/antre in some cantatas).

Reflecting the main aesthetic trends of the beginning of the 18th century, the French cantata genre became one of the personifications of the polemics of that time, because the main specificity of the French cantata is the relationship between French and Italian styles, which was manifested, in particular, in the peculiarities of the vocal art of that time [14]. Namely the French cantata became one of the genres where, during the first thirty years of the 18th century, the ideas of synthesis of the brightest features of two national traditions were embodied. According to the testimony of contemporaries, at first the French public was reluctant to "vocal melodic manifestations, eccentricity of harmony, general virtuosity and expansiveness of the types of accompaniment of Italian music. Gradually, however, it began to appreciate these stylistic features, which local composers sifted through the sieve of typical French melodiousness and expressiveness, organically integrating them into the musical material" [8, p. 61].

#### ***Jean-Philippe Rameau's chamber cantatas in the context of the formation of the composer's style***

Seven chamber cantatas by Rameau<sup>1</sup> (there were nine of them in total, but two have not survived) were written from 1721 to 1730<sup>2</sup>, that is, in the decade before the premiere of the first tragédie en musique, and turned out to be the composer's first "test of the pen" in the realm of drama music. In the previous five years, Rameau mastered the motet genre, which allows outlining the vector of the composer's assimilation of his contemporary genre system from chamber to large synthetic genres and a steady movement towards dramatic music. Chamber cantatas became his "creative laboratory" in the field of dramatic music, and the modest performance requirements of

<sup>1</sup> 1. Aquilon at Orithie, 1715–1719; 2. Thétis, 1715–1718; 3. Médée, 1715–1722, did not survive; 4. L'Absence, 1715–1722, did not survive; 5. L'Impatience, 1715–1722; 6. Les Amants trahis, do 1721; 7. Orphée, prior to 1721; 8. Le Berger fidèle, 1728. 9. Cantata pour le Fete de Saint-Louis (approx.1730)

<sup>2</sup> In the article, we rely on the chronology of M. Cyr [4]

the genre increased the chances of a real sounding of the works of an unknown young artist.

The vast majority of cantatas written by French composers are intended for the performance of the soprano voice with basso continuo, and namely for such a composition Rameau created the cantata "L'Impatience". However, in general, the composer uses different types of voices and instruments: "Aquilon et Orithie" and "Thetis" were written for bass accompanied by violin and basso continuo, "Orphée" and "Le Berger fidèle" - for soprano and instrumental ensemble (including violins, basso continuo and harpsichord), "Les amants trahis" - for two voices, soprano and bass accompanied by harpsichord and viola. It is worth noting that Rameau, like other French composers, uses mythological subjects in the texts of his cantatas. The characters of his cantatas are traditionally gods and heroes, and the plot basis is legends about them.

Having no reliable information about the names of the librettists and only the approximate dates of the performance of these works, however, having the musical material of the composer's cantatas at hand, it can be confidently asserted that this genre is fundamentally important in the formation of Rameau's creative method. Along with motets, cantatas are the first vocal-dramatic works in which the characteristic features of the artist's compositional style are formed. And while Rameau follows the French national tradition in spiritual music, his individual style in writing vocal parts is truly revealed in cantatas.

Rameau himself evaluated his cantatas as an important experience of a traveler on the way to a career as an opera composer. However, these works are filled with the same melodically bright numbers as the later operatic works of the artist. Some of them, like numbers from the cantatas "Aquilon et Orithie" and "Thetis" are full of declamatory energy, complemented by bright instrumental accompaniment; others, including the solo numbers from the cantata "Limitation" and the touching monologue in "Orphée", are filled with grace, sometimes with an elegiac tone. In many fast numbers, above all in the expressive instrumental obbligatos, one can note the unsurpassed skill with which Rameau combines the graceful contours of French vocal declamation with the liveliness of the Italian instrumental tradition, and the musical instruments complement the achieved dramatic effect with a solo voice, trying to compensate for the lack parameter of visual expression. Quite often, the composer uses the technique of highlighting individual words or phrases of the poetic text with the help of singing (which was not characteristic of French recitatives and arias), the use of elements of sound imagery and rhetorical figures, etc.

In the context of the confrontation between Italian and French national musical traditions, the spread of the cantata genre during the period of "fashion" for Italian music and vocal art during the Regency period and the decline of the genre in the 1730s, when the French national tradition came to the fore, is logical. At the same time, Rameau, having gained the necessary experience in small genres of vocal-instrumental music, moved on, completely consciously choosing the vector of development and the main goal in professional growth - musical theater.

#### 4 Conclusions

Jean-Philippe Rameau is a symbol of the perfection of the French style, a theoretical scientist, polemicist, musician, composer and performer, who is hard to imagine without close interaction with the environment. However, the introverted artist managed to find ideal forms and methods of representing his ideas. If in the early and mature period of creativity, the scientific plane of the artist's activity is represented by theoretical treatises, then in the musical sphere the genres of motet and cantata became fundamental on the way to "tragédie en musique" According to the researchers, Rameau highly valued the creative assets of the pre-opera period and "attached special importance to chamber works, because they provided an opportunity to demonstrate the skill of dramatic writing on a small scale" [11, p. 909]. This is confirmed by the composer's

words from a letter dated May 29, 1744 (published in the "Mercure de France" edition in June 1765, after the artist's death), where, answering a young musician's question about how to succeed in writing stage music, Rameau replied that it is best to start with small works, cantatas and divertissements, "which nourish the mind, educate the spirit, and gradually make it proficient in greater things" [11, p. 909]. Advocacy of theoretical positions in disputes with encyclopedists, zealous introduction of innovations into the plot and language of musical and theatrical works created difficulties in the composer's life and work. At the same time, tense relations with society, willingness of Rameau's to stick to his convictions even against his own interests is due to his colossal contribution to French musical culture.

Prospects for further study of the given topic are the possibility of using the obtained results and conclusions in scientific research devoted to the study of the chamber cantata genre in general and in the work of Rameau in particular, the peculiarities of dramaturgy, musical vocabulary, the embodiment of images in vocal art, as well as in practical use in performance and in educational courses on the history of music in artistic educational institutions.

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